

## Solutions to the 5 Most Common Measurement Mistakes

By: Pat Lynch, Ph.D., President

In environments that have become increasingly results-oriented, it is critical that public safety professionals be able to demonstrate their agencies' value to stakeholders. Robust, outcomes-centered measures are an ideal way to direct attention to agency contributions. In reality, such indicators often are woefully inadequate. To highlight your agency's value, try implementing the solutions below to avoid or mitigate the five most common measurement mistakes.

### **Mistake #1: Stating agency-centric outcomes instead of community-centered results**

**Problem:** By making the "big picture" about the agency, outcome measures will be seen as self-serving instead of as addressing stakeholders' interests.

**Example:** In its annual report, a fire agency's stated goal is to become "a destination department for firefighters."

**Solution:** State the outcome in terms of the benefits to the stakeholders so that its measures address their interests – e.g., a safe, healthy, economically viable community.

### **Mistake #2: Measuring activities or performance instead of results**

**Problem:** Stakeholders aren't interested in HOW you achieve the desired

outcome, they care that you attain it. Yet public safety measures often focus on activities or performance rather than on the results.

**Example:** Fire and rescue departments often report the number of inspections they conduct yearly.

**Solution:** Identify what happens *as a result* of activities or performance, and measure that outcome. For example, develop a measure that demonstrates how the agency's inspection program impacts the community's economic viability.

### **Mistake #3: Reporting data without providing meaningful context**

**Problem:** *Data* are independent pieces of information that by themselves are useless. Their significance cannot be evaluated unless they are placed in context.

**Example:** A police department announced that 30 new officers would be graduating from its training academy by the end of the year.

**Solution:** Provide context that is meaningful to your intended

audience by using percentages, ratios, trend analysis, multi-period comparisons, or other methods that allow people to interpret and evaluate data effectively. For example, adding the number of open positions and the total number of officers today compared to pre-recession levels would allow an informed evaluation of how the news affects the level of public safety.

**Mistake #4: Failing to plan**

**Problem:** Agencies waste resources and possibly end up without the information they need when employees collect data without thinking about why and how they will be used.

**Example:** As its university system periodically requested more information, a campus law enforcement agency dutifully collected and submitted the new data. Over time, officers found themselves gathering information that was irrelevant to their agency and/or was redundant or obsolete.

**Solution:** Conduct a measurement size-up: determine the appropriate outcome indicators, collect the relevant data, and discard those that are no longer useful. Planning enables the efficient use of resources and the identification of actionable data.

**Mistake #5: Lack of specificity**

**Problem:** Measures that include fuzzy words and passive verbs, and/or that omit key information are useless because their meanings vary from person to person.

**Example:** A workshop description promises participants will know how to resolve conflict. Evaluating whether the workshop actually delivers that outcome is not possible because “know” is open to interpretation. For instance, does it mean that people will be able to *describe* how to resolve conflicts, or that they actually will be able to *settle* disputes? Must the solutions be sustainable?

**Solution:** Use active verbs that denote observable actions, behaviors, and/or results. Make sure each measure answers clearly the question, “How will stakeholders be able to tell that the desired result was achieved?”

By focusing on outcomes important to stakeholders, providing contexts that stakeholders find meaningful, thinking through how and why you will use the data, and developing measures with a high degree of specificity, you will be able to demonstrate clearly the value your agency provides to the community. ➔

Pat Lynch, Ph.D., is President of Business Alignment Strategies, Inc., a consulting firm that helps first responders maximize their performance by removing or mitigating obstacles that prevent them from achieving their mission.